

Siri Pettersen - Subverting Reality through Fantasy

Cristina VIȘOVAN¹



Siri Pettersen

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Siri PETTERSEN (born 1971) is an acclaimed Norwegian fantasy writer who has managed to challenge the Norwegian Publishing Houses' perception about this genre.

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Endowed with a vivid imagination, she developed from early on a sense for creating stories which allowed her to experience fantastic realms as a means of escaping an injudicious reality whose rules Pettersen constantly broke as part of a role-play group of fantasy enthusiasts.

These intense and meaningful experiences of impersonation helped Pettersen find her identity which seems to be built around the idea of fighting injustice and empathising with others. In fact, she won her first awards in 2002 and 2004 as an illustrator and cartoonist of a comics series entitled *Anti-Klimaks* (*Anti-Climax*) which focuses on a group of youngsters who defy modern society.

However, it was not until 2013 that she made her literary debut in the fantasy genre with the novel *Odinsbarn* (*Odin's Child*), the first book in the *Raven Rings* (*Ravneringene*) series. Its publication represented not only a breakthrough for fantasy literature on the Norwegian market, but also a break away from some of the established conventions of this type of literature. In her book, Pettersen uses the Norse myths to create a totally new universe filled with relatable characters, managing at the same time to engage the reader with contemporary discourses on ethnicity/ race, otherness, the fear of the unknown and blind faith among others. The novel was an instant sensation and it got nominated for the Norwegian Bookseller's Prize (2013), the Book Blogger's Prize (2013) and the Ministry of Culture's Debut Award (2014), while in 2014 it won the prestigious *Fabelprisen*; in 2016, *Odinsbarn* was included on the IBBY (The International Board on Books for Young People) Honour List, a biennial selection of outstanding books which have been published recently.

The next books in the trilogy, *Råta* (*The Rot*, 2014) and *Evna* (*The Might*, 2015) continue Hirka's story (a 15-year-old girl with no special powers, the main character of *Odinsbarn*) exploring themes like greed, the thirst for revenge, the fear of death, power and arrogance and have earned Pettersen further prizes: the ARK Bookchain's "Book of the Year" Award 2015, *Havmannprisen* (Havmann Award) 2015, *Sørlandets litteraturpris* (Norwegian South Literary Award) 2016.

The mythic universe of the *Raven Rings* series is further explored by Siri Pettersen in her next fantasy novel *Jernulven* (*The Iron Wolf*, 2020), the intricate and engaging series opener of the Vardari trilogy, which builds around another young and strong girl, Juva, taking into discussion impactful topics such as blood, desire and addiction.

In her novels, Pettersen exploits the Nordic culture, climate and mythology to create unique worlds, she recombines familiar elements of our world and reinvents the classic elements of fantasy literature, allowing young girls to become protagonists in an attempt to highlight certain contemporary prejudices and attitudes. This aligns with her belief in the power of books to help us embrace different perspectives by relating to other people's experiences, imagining their alienation and grasping the suffering derived from it:

... The world is formed through books ... When we read a book or watch a movie, it is easy to let go of the defence mechanisms. We allow us to be swept away and be emotionally manipulated. Our opinions are formed in this way. Our culture. The politics ... What you mean about current issues can be traced back to the stories you have heard. The one who owns the stories owns the world. For better or for worse. We all have a responsibility for the world's collective storytelling (Florvaag 2013, my translation)².

CRISTINA VIȘOVAN: First of all, thank you Siri for agreeing to have this interview! You are an award-winning and best-selling author from Norway and your books have been translated to more than 10 languages so far, but the Romanian readership still has to wait before it can discover the worlds that you create in your novels. If you were to introduce yourself to the Romanian readers, how would you describe yourself and your authorship?

SIRI PETTERSEN: I am a fantasy writer from the far north of Norway and I build my stories on a Norse foundation, which I believe gives them character and a strong sense of place and history. I am also very passionate about the genre! Fantasy serves a far greater purpose than many give it credit for.

C.V.: Why would one choose to read and write fantasy nowadays when the reality is right 'here'? And what was it that actually drove YOU to start writing in this genre?

S.P.: I am so glad you asked! For me, it was not a conscious choice to write fantasy, it was a given. I have always loved the genre and never questioned if I should write something else. Why fantasy? Well, let us look at the way you frame that question. "Why fantasy when reality is right here?" Fantasy IS about reality! It is a brilliant tool to write about real things and real people because it allows you to start from a blank slate in the reader's mind. If I decided to write about, say, war in a realistic novel, everyone would have an opinion about the conflict already. But with fantasy, I can actually bypass any previous knowledge and prejudice. It is a fresh start! And yes, fantasy is excellent for escapism, but it is so much more important. These are our new myths, the heritage of folktales, the stories we learned from. Today, they give us motivation and lessons in self-

² 'Verden formes av bøker. Underholdningsindustrien lever av at vi elsker historier ... Når vi leser en bok eller ser en film, er det lett å slippe tak i forsvarsmekanismene. Vi lar oss rive med, og blir følelsesmessig manipulert. Slik formes meningene våre. Kulturen vår. Politikken ... Det du mener om aktuelle problemstillinger kan spores tilbake til historiene du har hørt. Den som eier historiene, eier verden. På godt og vondt. Vi har alle et ansvar for verdens kollektive historiefortelling'.

discovery. The unreal will inspire new generations to tackle our biggest and very real problems.

C.V.: You have sold over 250.000 books around the world by now. Still, in the beginning, people did not believe that writing in the fantasy genre would catch to the Norwegian readership or that Norwegian fantasy could turn into such a success abroad. Would you say that these have been, to a certain extent, motivating factors in your authorship?

S.P.: We have now rounded 400 000 sold, actually, so that is quite surreal. And to tell you the truth, I did not really care much about what was said, I just really wanted to write these books. It was not until I had finished the first one that I realised just how incredibly unlikely it was to succeed. But today, the heart-warming generosity from readers around the world is fuel for me. It makes me a better writer because I would hate to disappoint them.

C.V.: Your books have been included in the category of Young Adult fiction but fewer and fewer young people seem to be willing to engage in the activity of reading nowadays due to various distractions. How do you think that the genre of fantasy could benefit them and motivate them to read more?

S.P.: I see this all the time, that fewer young people read, but believe it or not, I am not sure that is true! What is changing is *what* we are reading, for how long and on what devices, but I believe that young people today read far more than I did myself when I was their age. Just think about it: we had to actively choose to sit down with a paper or a book and read, but now you can read everywhere you go and youth are exposed to far more content than we ever were. Bombarded with it. It teaches them to be critical thinkers to a bigger degree than before, so I have faith! But yes, we are struggling with a real challenge here: The lack of focus and deep concentration – for everyone, not just young people - and this is where fantasy makes a difference. It is a remarkable genre that sparks fandoms and genuine passion. There is fan art and cosplay and tattoos and endless proof of how deeply fantasy moves readers. They do not just *read* fantasy, they immerse themselves in it, they *live* it and when they are hooked there is no such thing as a too thick book!

C.V.: So far you have published one internationally acclaimed trilogy, the Raven Rings, and the first book of the Vardari trilogy, The Iron Wolf. Please tell us a few words about them, their plots and their relationship.

S.P.: Well, they are set in the same universe, but in different worlds, so they are independent. Still, there is a connection, and the premise of travel between worlds is present in all of them, even the one that is set in *our* world. For the plot, there is a lot to find on my website: <https://www.siripettersen.com/theravenrings>.

C.V.: Two of the main themes of these books are xenophobia and the fear of the unknown. Could you comment a bit more on them and why they play such a big role in the development of your novels?

S.P.: Fear of the other has always been in our nature, and just imagine how the world would be different if we learned to rise above that. So many lives are lost, so much politics made and so many limitations arise simply out of fear. In *Odin's Child*, the most feared person is hated simply for being human and that was a situation everyone could empathise with because *we are all human*. Suddenly, hating someone for what they are becomes outrageous. Like I said earlier, it turned out to be an effective way to bypass prejudice.

C.V.: Another important element in the storyline of your books is the idea of power and control and how certain people 'inherit' them and abuse them, while others just believe in the existing authority without ever questioning it. How important is it for real people to understand this relationship and why is it relevant in our daily lives?

S.P.: I am deeply fascinated with leaders and leadership! Who has it, why, and how do they use it or earn it? The will to take and abuse power has always been present, but the risks are higher than ever before because so much damage can be done now. We can no longer afford to sit back and hope or wait, it is incredibly important that we learn to defend our common rights, our planet and to recognise when we are led astray.

C.V.: The Vardari trilogy is set in the same universe as *The Raven Rings*, a universe built on Norse mythology. In what way does this mythology shape the realms you create and what is the connection between Norse myths, gods and your characters? In your previous interviews you also linked your novels with the Nordic and Norwegian culture and the contemporary socio-political context. Could your rewriting of the original myths be interpreted as an attempt to critique the contemporary tendencies of using culture as a distinctive marker in the encounter with the 'Other'? How significant is in this situation the fact that your main characters are females?

S.P.: Really interesting question, I love that you ask! My books are not *about* Norse mythology as such, but they build on a Norse foundation. Enthusiasts and scholars will find countless elements that can be seen as mythological. For instance, the Might, which is the flow of energy between worlds, has been interpreted as Yggdrasil and the stone circles as the bridge Bifrost. My intention - which touches upon your question - was to create a world where everything was new but *still familiar*. Readers might even think that Ymslanda was the origin of our own mythology. And when I move between worlds it becomes clear that there is always something older, something more original and it is all a result of continuous cultural exchange. In the end, there is no yours or mine, there is just us.

When it comes to female characters, I did not even consider why or how when I started writing. All characters are equal to me and they should be complex and interesting, regardless of their age, race, gender, faith or sexual orientation. In fact, some people think that the spectrum of characters *had* to be a conscious choice, but it really was not. I started writing *Odin's Child* a long time ago, before diversity was a common subject in the book business. I just thought it would be weird to have a world *without* different types of characters. Some people ask if I decided to write 'strong female characters' but strength can be many things. I have heard that Hirka as a main character is loved for being strong in a 'softer' sense. Her strength comes from love, generosity and integrity, rather than her ability to swing a sword.

C.V.: If we dare to hope that your books will be translated to Romanian in the near future, is there a message you would like to send to Romanian fantasy enthusiasts?

S.P.: Oh, that would be wonderful and I cannot wait to see what magic Romanian readers will bring to social media! A warm welcome to you all and thank you for reading fantasy! Whatever they say, always trust that this is the genre that will save the world and keep reading what you love to read.

Cristina VIȘOVAN is an English and Norwegian, PhD teacher at "Mihai Eminescu" National College, Baia Mare. She has published a series of articles on the influence of Norse mythology on contemporary Norwegian literature and a book entitled 'Rewriting Norse Mythology in Contemporary Norwegian Literature. The Search for Identity in a Multicultural World' in 2021 at Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, in the Nordica Collection. Email: cristina.visovan@eminescubm.ro

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